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**REMARKS  
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Asalaam ‘malaikum, Ramadan karim, nameskar, and good afternoon

Guts ...

Lots of guts ... it takes lots of guts to head off into the great unknown – America – halfway around the world ... a place far from family, friends, the familiar, a place where you may not know anyone or only a few ... where everyone speaks funny, where the cultural cues are different, where you as a foreigner become a minority.

Don’t expect the America of the movies and TV shows...that is the America of Hollywood, not the America of reality.

The real America, the America you will experience is the America to which every description that you can think of is valid: dazzlingly wealth, wretched poverty, cutting edge modernity, cultures living fully in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, diversity and harmony/ bigotry and racial prejudice, openness and friendliness/ insularity and isolation, deep brilliance and intellectual curiosity/ profound ignorance of the world (keep track of how many days pass before you meet an American who knows the name of Bangladesh’s capital city or even where Bangladesh is!) ... I could go on and on, but I think that I’ve made my point that there are few adjectives in the English language that don’t apply to America ... I know there must be some, but I just can’t think of any.

I am glad my mother could not make it here today. She just turned 93 and wasn’t up to the trip to join us here. I’m glad, because I am going to violate one of my mother’s basic rules of life: never offer unsolicited advice. She would not be pleased, but since she’s in Iowa, here goes. I am going to share with you the advice that I give to each newly-arrived member of my staff when he or she pays a courtesy call on me shortly after arrival here in Dhaka. Here’s what I say: take Bangladesh for what it is, avoid judging it “good” or “bad,” but accept and enjoy it as

“different.” I tell them to feast on the richness of Bangladesh, explore Dhaka and the countryside, reach out and connect with the Bangladeshis, be curious, ask questions, try to understand, be respectful. I leave it to you to assess whether any of that is applicable to you.

You are called students, and, of course, you are as you head off to earn undergraduate or graduate degrees. But you are so much more. You are bridge builders ... builders of bridges of understanding between America and Bangladesh. As you engage and connect with Americans and fellow students from all over the world, you will build so many bridges. And the traffic over these bridges goes both ways: you will learn about America, but, just as importantly, you will introduce others to Bangladesh, to the real Bangladesh, the Bangladesh beyond the stereotypes, the Bangladesh beyond the nightmare stories of the Tazreen Fashions fire, Rana Plaza building collapse or political violence, the Bangladesh that is filled with optimism as the economy steadily grows, as millions are lifted out of poverty, the Bangladesh that has undertaken an agricultural revolution that has already made the world’s most densely populated country rice self-sufficient, the Bangladesh that could be/should be the next Asian Economic Tiger ... you get the idea.

As Bangladeshis, you have a great advantage in building such bridges. As I tell all new staff at the American Embassy, Bangladeshis are the most open, friendly and engaging people I know. I tell staff that if they are willing to go ten percent ... only ten percent of the way, Bangladeshis will go ninety percent to build connections and friendships. These natural traits will serve you well as you build so many bridges.

Two years from now, four years from now, maybe more, you will be back in Bangladesh, you will be alumni, American alumni, members I hope of the American Alumni Association, and you will be busy, so busy putting your American education to work to build the New Bangladesh, the Middle-Income Bangladesh where all have the means to provide their families safe, secure housing, ample, nutritious food, good healthcare and quality education. As you study in America, work hard, push yourself that extra mile, learn as much as you can, absorb as much as you can, so when you return to Bangladesh you are prepared to give the most to building this wonderful nation.

Whether you are studying history and political science like I did, engineering, medicine, the arts, languages, business, whatever field, I hope each of you will return to Bangladesh with the best skills, knowledge, creativity, curiosity, problem-solving ability possible, so you, like your many predecessors who studied in America, can do your part in creating Sonar Bangla.

As I close, I congratulate you for your success in gaining entry to some of the world’s best and most demanding schools; I congratulate you on persevering and prevailing through batteries of tests; I congratulate and thank you for choosing America for your higher education. I hope you will find that you have made a good choice. In choosing America, you join over 3828 Bangladeshis already studying there. You are part of an ever growing Bangladeshi student body in America, where my goal is to increase the number of Bangladeshi students to 32,480, a ten-fold increase from when I arrived in November 2011.

Today, as you sit before me you represent the future of Bangladesh. When you return after completing your studies in America, you will no longer be the future of the nation, but rather the present of Bangladesh ... you then will be the builders of Bangladesh ... upon your shoulders will descend the task of taking this great nation, these wonderful people to ever greater heights.

I wish you well ... study hard ... learn about America ... teach about Bangladesh ... and build as many bridges between our two countries as you possibly can.

Thank you.

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*\*As prepared for delivery*